

GOD’S DOORKEEPER

Saint Conrad of Parzham, Capuchin Laybrother

By

FATHER ALOYSIUS, O.M.Cap.

NOTE: The facts related in this short sketch are taken chiefly from the most interesting account, “Blessed Conrad of Parzham,” by the Vice-Postulator of the Cause, Father Joseph Anthony, O.M.Cap. (Translated by Father Andrew Neufield, O.M.Cap.) This competent biographer can claim unique authority and had intimate acquaintance with the details of the story. Indeed, our only reason for compiling this outline of the life of the saint is to secure a wider circulation and to bring this simple, but beautiful, career of sanctity to the knowledge of people who might not have an opportunity to peruse the larger volume. It may, too, help to awaken an interest that will lead to a demand for a worthier and more complete biography. We have also consulted the scholarly treatise by Father Dunstan, O.S.F.C. (Greyfriars, Oxford) and articles in periodicals, in particular, the Father Mathew Record, the Capuchin Annual, and the Franciscan Annals.

In conformity with the decrees of Urban VIII and other Roman Pontiffs, the author declares that no authority, other than purely human authority or tradition, is claimed for any incidents, favors or miracles alluded to, except those authenticated by the Holy See in the processes of Beatification and Canonization.

Introduction

TIME vindicates justice and righteousness. But it is difficult to understand how the verdict of time—given age after age the wisdom of God manifested so clearly at every epoch of history—can still be ignored, and how the world of men will yet persist in pursuing the ways of injustice and folly. Christ was condemned to die between criminals; the world had triumphed, it seemed! Christ rose from the dead and the religion which, it was thought, had died with Him and which counted only a paltry following of ignorant men, came forth with Him from the tomb.

Christianity, for a season concealed in private houses or buried in the catacombs, at length emerged from its hiding places to preach in majestic basilica and imperial court the wisdom of God and the victory of the Crucified Christ. The forces of hell and the rulers of darkness were curbed for a short time—but only for a short time. Those forces advance again to war against the Lord and His Christ; heresy, persecution, torture, prison, and death combine to break the spirit of Christ’s disciples and to undo the achievements of His Church. It is in vain. He promised that the “gates of hell would not prevail against her,” (Matt. xvi, 18) and He said that “He would be with her all days, even to the end of time” (Matt. xxviii, 20). We see history repeating itself in every age; the victory of Easter Morn and Pentecost Sunday renewed again and again. And, today, after nineteen centuries, the standards of the world float defiantly, and men deny in their lives, if not always so loudly in their words, the claims of the Crucified.

“I am the Way, the Truth and the Life” (John xiv, 6); the way is too narrow, the truth is too unpractical, the life is too constrained for the modern world—meekness and gentleness, self-denial and humility will get you nowhere. So, the old struggle goes on—the strife between paganism and Christianity, and paganism persists in asserting itself as shamelessly and brazenly as ever. Wicked men spend their lives deceiving their fellowmen, and designing men rise to power on dishonest professions of humanitarianism, only to die despised, and to be forgotten before their bones have decayed in the grave. But God’s word cannot fail; and, so, the Church, the standard-bearer of Christ, remains impregnable and triumphant. From the little City of the Vatican the voice of Pius proclaims the Gospel of his Crucified King, extols humility, poverty, self-denial and charity! There are men who listen to that teaching and who have the courage to translate it into their lives. Many of them never cross the confines of their native town; some of them are not known outside the narrow region of the field they till, or the factory in which they toil; others live their lives in the cloister, and their deeds are hidden from the observation of the world. Men may not recognize their usefulness; they have not failed, for they have realized the purpose of God in creating them, and in His eyes their lives are beautiful. Some of them are heroes and God will have the triumph of their virtues known that He may be glorified, and that the magnificent mission of His Church may justify itself before those who would deny her and deride her.

In recent times, we have had the Cure of Ars (Saint John Mary Vianney), Saint Therese of the Child Jesus, and the uneducated peasant child (Saint Bernadette of Lourdes). Now it is the humble Capuchin laybrother, the Doorkeeper of the Friary of Altotting in Bavaria.

“How timely for our age is the edifying example of this pious, magnanimous laybrother, the humble, lovable Brother Conrad of Parzham, who renounced all material possessions to devote himself to a life of self-denial in the austere garb of a Capuchin. What a contrast to worldly men! What an edifying subject for imitation!” (Pius XI on August 15, 1928)

THE SAINT’S CHILDHOOD

Saint Conrad was born in Parzham, a small townland in Southern Bavaria. The valley of the Rott, extending along both sides of the River Rott, a tributary of the Inn, consists of rich land and yields abundant crops. It is divided up amongst an industrious farming community. The inhabitants are of good physique, and, generally, tall of stature and light in complexion. They are an honest, kindly people and are very much attached to their ancient customs and traditions. The little hamlet of Parzham occupies an eminence and right on the top is the Venushof, a farm house with some one hundred acres of land, which was formerly the property of a Peter Venus, to whom it owed its name. Barbara, a daughter of the proprietor of the farm married George Birndorfer, a miller in the neighboring village of Bayerbach, and, so, the Venushof passed into the possession of the Birndorfers. Bartholomew Birndorfer, the eldest son of this marriage, and Gertrude Niedmayer, were the parents of the future saint.

Bartholomew Birndorfer and his young wife endured severe hardship in the early days of their married life. Napoleon’s armies had beaten the Austrians at Eggmühl, and part of the defeated army, retreating through the valley of the Rott, was hotly pursued by the French troops. Many of the inhabitants abandoned their homes and fled before, the ruthless soldiery, and large areas were left tenantless and desolate. The Birndorfers remained on their farm, but it cost them a severe struggle and many sacrifices

to eke out a meager existence for themselves and the little family that was beginning to grow up around them. They accepted their lot with courage and trust in Providence.

In the year 1816, the spring was exceptionally wet with fierce gales and cloudbursts. That season was followed by an inclement harvest season and a severe winter, with the result that 1817 saw famine and distress widespread amongst the people. Happily, in 1818 there came a good supply of grain and the anxiety of the peasants was relieved; hope and peace again lighted up their lives and gave promise of comfort and contentment. At the Venushof, there was an event that seemed a harbinger of happier days. Of the children already born of the marriage, the couple had lost two, chiefly through their inability to provide sufficient and wholesome nourishment. Now, God sent them a little baby boy and with him brighter prospects of happy days for the homestead. He was the ninth child, born on 22 December 1818. The parents welcomed the little visitor with gladness and gratitude and looked on him as a precious Christmas gift from a kind God. The Birndorfers were fervent Catholics whose first thought for the children with whom God blessed them was the welfare of their souls, and no time was lost in securing the priceless grace of regeneration for their child. He was baptized on the day of his birth, and was called John Evangelist, after the beloved disciple.

“The first school bench of the child,” it has been said, “is the arm of its mother and the child’s first priedieu is its mother’s knee.” God bestowed on little John Birndorfer the inestimable blessing of an ideal Catholic home. “There is no family in the district as pious, modest, and peaceful” was the verdict of an old man who worked for the Birndorfers for many years. Prayer, Christian doctrine, and charity made this home an admirable nursery of solid virtue and intelligent piety. The parents gathered their children around them every evening for family prayers. The Rosary of Mary was said in common and during Holy Week the fifteen mysteries were recited daily. Religious reading and devout preparation for the reception of the Sacraments were regular features of this model family. The Venushof was also noted for its hospitality and the poor were treated with kindness and even reverence. In the cold wintry months, it was a rare night that some tired traveler did not enjoy the shelter and warmth of the farm house and a generous provision of food. It would, we think, be difficult to apportion the share of that lesson of charity in the formation of the Christ-like character of the future disciple of the Poor Man of Assisi.

For the first six years, John’s teacher was his pious mother. In later years he will say that she was “his first novice master.” She taught him his first prayer and she sowed deep in his child heart the seeds of faith and virtue. At the age of six John was sent to a school at Weng, a village about a half-hour’s walk from Parzham. The little fellow was industrious and intelligent. His conduct, too, was pious and blameless. In his presence, no one dared utter an unseemly word or a rude joke. “Here comes Johnny Birndorfer” was the signal to the company to be on its best behavior. We have not found a record of John’s First Communion, but we do assume that the happy event took place in his seventh year, as early Communion was the practice at that period in the diocese of Passau.

Even in his tender years, John manifested an affectionate love for the Mother of God. On his way to school, on the road between Parzham and Weng, he recited the Rosary, and the boy, who, later in life, will be spoken of as “the Apostle of Mary,” persuaded several of his young school companions to join with him in telling Mary’s beads. After school, the lad helped about the farm—drawing water, caring for the cattle, running on messages, and doing various little jobs for his parents or for his elder sisters

and brothers.

HIS EARLY MANHOOD

Before many years, John's help on the farm would be more needed. He was fourteen and had only just left school when death claimed his beloved mother. Less than two years later, his father died.

The Mystery of the Cross fills a large part in the life of the follower of Christ. "No one is nearer to the Crucified King," someone has said, "than the friend He crucifies in His mercy." God had blessed the home of the Birndorfers at Parzham with everything that goes to build up happiness and holiness. In their early days of struggle, the parents had experienced want and anxiety and they had the sorrow of seeing two little darlings snatched from their arms by the angel of death. But those days were long since passed, and now there reigned peace, union, affection, and holiness in that beautiful earthly paradise. The children knew nothing of worry or suffering. The Crucifix was there, the honored standard of their faith, but its lessons were a far-off thing; the sufferings of the God-Man were the revelation of His love, but the parents asked no sacrifice from their children except voluntary acts of self-denial, which they were taught to offer up to Christ Crucified. Their love for God was now tried in the crucible of sorrow and their trust in God was put to the test. If there was one lesson that the children of the Venushof had been taught, it was confidence in a kind providence. And they met this crisis in their lives in a truly Christian spirit and with the conviction that God would never abandon them.

They were now called on to divide the care and cultivation of the farm between them. But their first step was to pay a tribute of reverence to the memory of their parents. They erected a monument over the grave and inscribed on it in verse the expression of their profound thankfulness.

John took the place of a farmhand on the land. His early training in a thoroughly Catholic home had fitted him for the battle of life and we find him already understanding the secret of the sanctification of work—a lesson that his life will leave as a heritage of wisdom and holiness to men in every age and in every sphere of toil. He found time—he made time—for prayer and other religious practices; he did not neglect his duty. He realized the worth of work and consecrated and ennobled his labors through the abiding consciousness of God's presence and the use of ejaculatory prayer. He always carried his Rosary beads with him and would say a decade between duties. He put up with a good deal of banter from his friends and the other farm hands laughed at his piety. The young man's only answer was to persevere; his grit and determination soon silenced the taunts and evoked admiration. Parents held him up for an example to their boys and encouraged them to pray like Johnny Birndorfer. In the winter months, work was not so continuous and did not begin at so early an hour. This afforded John an opportunity for additional exercises of piety. When at all possible he assisted at daily Mass. To hear week-day Mass meant rising early, taking a long journey, and, perhaps, braving storm or snow or drenching rain, or wading through swollen streams. Witnesses tell that John was wont to stay in his place until he believed that everyone else had left the Church. Then he would go right up to the altar and, kneeling on the step, remained a long time in devout prayer before the Tabernacle. After Our Lady, his favorite saints were Saint Joseph, Saint Francis of Assisi, and Saint Conrad of Piacenza. At 18 years of age he chose Saint Aloysius as his patron and guardian and throughout his life he had a very particular devotion to the Angelic Patron of Youth.

In the autumn of 1838, the Tercentenary of the Pilgrim Church of Saint Anne, at Ering, was celebrated with a parish mission that proved an epoch-making event in the district. Owing to the cruel conditions that had fettered religious liberty in Bavaria for over half a century, it had been impossible to hold a parish mission until now. Religious Orders had been expelled and pilgrimages and other manifestations of Catholic enthusiasm had been discouraged. It is scarcely surprising, then, that the mission should arouse intense interest and the records of the parish tell us that as many as 5,000 persons received the Sacraments during the eight days of spiritual exercises. The records also tell us that attendance was so vast that it was found necessary to have sermons preached in the open air. John Birndorfer was present at all the exercises, although the journey demanded a six hours' walk. He was then in his twentieth year and there is no doubt that this mission very decidedly influenced the development of the spiritual life of the young man. We are told he made a general Confession of his whole life and his sister bore witness that there was a marked change in his conduct from that time. He was more reserved and thoughtful; he fasted more rigorously and in other ways added to his practices of penance. Whilst he grew more severe with himself, it was remarked that he became more gentle with others, and kind, especially to the poor. He joined the sodalities and took a very real part in all the Catholic activities of his parish. There was at the time a deplorable prevalence of drinking and unbecoming pastimes on Sundays amongst the young men. John was by no means a dour fellow, but he could find no time for conduct that was unchristian. He attended two Masses on Sundays. If there was not an early Mass at Weng, he would walk four miles to Griesbach and then assist at late Mass in his parish. In the afternoon he might walk to his favorite little wooden chapel in the forest at Lugen, where he could pray in quiet before the images of the Suffering Savior and the Holy Mother. Sometimes he visited the shrines at Kronberg and Marianhilf, as well as the famous shrine of Our Lady at Altötting. Another noted place of pilgrimage was Aigen, and it was here that John met Father Dullinger, the pastor of Aigen. His thoughts had been turning in the direction of the priesthood or the monastic state. He needed someone to advise him, and in Father Dullinger he happily found one who was a skilled guide of souls, and John readily recognized in him a God-sent director.

Aigen was twenty miles from Parzham. For close on ten years John made that journey every eight days, or, at least, once in the fortnight. Rising at 1 a.m., he reached the church at Aigen in time for the 6 a.m. Mass. Often he was at the church before 4 a.m. and waited on his knees on the doorstep until the church was opened. He made his Confession, heard Mass, received Holy Communion, and then again covered the twenty long miles home without breaking his fast. He had already joined several confraternities and he took an active part in religious organizations. In 1842 he made his profession in the Third Order of Saint Francis. In the Rule of the Third Order he found a very helpful means of sanctifying his labors on the farm and regulating his relations with his fellowmen. It was not enough. He felt that God wanted more from him and he was not happy in the world. For some reason which we cannot determine, his application to a seminary for the priesthood, or a monastic institute, was, we are told, refused, or, at least, was not encouraged. For the time being he had to content himself with an endeavour to realize the ideals of Saint Francis in the ranks of the Tertiaries. But the marriage of his elder brother and his sisters forced a decision as to his future. He was expected to take over the management of the farm. It was a tempting prospect. He would have no difficulty making a very comfortable livelihood, and could find ample opportunity for his devotions! No; he had other plans. With the approval of his spiritual director, Father Dullinger, he sought admission to the Capuchin Order at Altötting and he was accepted as a lay-

brother postulant. He disposed of all his worldly belongings; part of his possessions he gave to the poor and the other portion he assigned to the extension of the parish cemetery at Weng. Foolish man, thought many a friend and neighbor! He was thirty-one years of age; he had a good knowledge of farming and could make an excellent member of the farming community. And, then, could he not, as a practical and zealous Catholic layman, prove a tower of strength to his priest and fellow-Catholics in the parish? Instead, he parted with all those opportunities to hide himself away in the cloister for which he had no training, and, perhaps, little aptitude! John knew his own mind. He was familiar with the Gospel parable of the rich man. “Fool is he that layeth up treasures for himself and is not rich towards God” (Luke, xii). And he chose a form of life in which he would not own the clothes he wore, would eat the bread of charity, and would take his rest upon a rude bed in a bare, unfurnished cell. What mattered it for a few years here? Better to have God’s friendship and to have treasures in heaven!

He gathered his brothers and sisters together in a room at the Venushof and spoke a parting word. That word of wise counsel and Godly guidance remained with them; a treasured memory and a helpful lesson through their lives.

THE CAPUCHIN LAYBROTHER

Three-quarters of a century of persecution had disorganized the religious Orders in Bavaria. But a saintly Capuchin, Father Gabriel Engl, of Tyrol, who was sent to Bavaria in 1834, succeeded in restoring the glory of the Bavarian Province, which had been founded by the great Saint Lawrence of Brindisi. This Father Gabriel (whose fame for saintliness of life, discernment of character, and zeal for religious discipline, is still held in benediction) lived to see John Birndorfer a Religious of the Province. John, the Postulant, was appointed to act as assistant to the Brother Porter of the monastery at Altotting. To a relative at that period he excused himself for his delay in writing because “the day is arranged for work and prayer, hence, there is little time for anything else.” “My associates,” he said, “are very good, and we dwell together entirely in peace. . . . At first I found it hard to live together, with so many others, for I was shy. . . . It took me a long time to remember all the names, which, as porter, I had to know, for people ask sometimes for one Father, sometimes for another.” He grew very much attached to his new home for, even before he had any thought of living there, he had made pilgrimages to the shrine of Our Lady of Altotting and from his boyhood days he had the tenderest affection for the Blessed Mother of God.

He had renounced all family ties and earthly possessions; he found rich compensation in dwelling so close to the miraculous image of Mary. And now, he was to suffer the first big trial of his religious life; he must sacrifice even this spiritual attachment on the altar of holy obedience. He was transferred to the house at Burghausen and his chief duty was to nurse a sick Father. “I must now leave the holy shrine of Altotting,” he writes on 25 May 1851, “and I cannot conceal the fact that I find it hard to leave this holy place to which so many thousands come to visit Our Blessed Mother. . . . Obedience calls me to Burghausen. . . . Pray much for me that I may be a true son of Saint Francis and live and die as such.”

After some months the invalid priest was removed to Altotting but his nurse was not to accompany him. Instead, John Birndorfer was sent to the lay novitiate house at Laufen, where, on 17 September 1851—Feast of the Sacred Stigmata of Saint Francis—he received the habit of a Capuchin Novice. He will,

henceforth, be known as Brother Conrad—Conrad, the name under which he will be revered and invoked by millions of Christians throughout the world in years to come.

Brother Conrad was made assistant to the Brother Gardener. A novice must give up his own will and his spirit of submission and unquestioning obedience is repeatedly put to the test. And Brother Conrad needed all his strength of character and habit of virtue to support him in thus yielding prompt compliance in little things as well as in matters of greater moment. Of a naturally sensitive disposition, he felt very keenly the corrections and reproofs that were administered to him frequently. Often they were undeserved, but, doubtless, they were meant to ground him in humility and fortitude. He was scrupulously exact in the fulfillment of any task entrusted to him. Smiling and affable, you would never suspect that he found the life of a novice trying, if he had not himself admitted it. He did not spare himself in the world; his days were spent in hard toil and he imposed severe penances on himself. In the world, he was his own master; in religion he was expected to minister to others and to be the servant of all.

On 4 October 1852, the Feast of Saint Francis, Brother Conrad had the happiness of making profession as a son of Saint Francis of Assisi. According to custom, the novice prepared for the momentous day by retreat. Perhaps we can find no better indication of the spirit in which he took the eventful step that bound him to a life of labor and sacrifice for God, than the resolutions that he penned during the days of the spiritual exercises. He headed the memo, “Resolutions taken with great deliberation and full confidence in the assistance of Jesus and Mary to help me to keep them.” These are the resolutions:

1. Presence of God: “I will strive earnestly to form the habit of always placing myself in the presence of God and of often asking myself, ‘Would I do this or that if my confessor or superior were observing me, and especially in the presence of God and my Angel Guardian.’ ”
2. Bearing the Cross: “I will often ask myself when crosses and pain come to me, ‘Brother Conrad, why are you here?’ ”
3. Protection of the Cloister: “I will, as much as possible, avoid going out of the monastery, unless charity to my neighbor or obedience or health require it, or for some other good reason.”
4. Fraternal Charity: “I will earnestly strive to cultivate brotherly love. I will patiently bear with the faults, defects, and weaknesses of others, and, as far as I can, I will throw the mantle of charity over them whenever I am obliged to report them to one who has the power to correct them.”
5. Silence: “I will observe silence as much as possible. I will be sparing of words in conversation and so avoid many faults and may be able to converse better with God.”
6. Frugality: “At table I will place myself in the presence of God. . . . I will deny myself dishes that I would relish particularly and will practice mortifications that are least noticeable. Outside of meal time I will take no food unless commanded by holy obedience.”
7. Punctuality: “If not otherwise prevented, I will go to the choir immediately when the signal is given.”
8. Chastity: “As much as possible I will avoid association with persons of the other sex, unless obedience compels me.”
9. Obedience: “I will practice obedience exactly and punctually and will endeavour to conquer my own will in all things.”

10. Fidelity to Rule: "I will try to be faithful, even in small matters. I will never depart from the holy Rule, even by a hair's breadth."
11. Devotion to the Mother of God: "I will ever strive to cultivate a tender devotion to the Blessed Virgin and will endeavour to imitate her virtues."

THE DOORKEEPER AT ALTOTTING

A short time after his profession, Brother Conrad was again transferred to Altotting, and was appointed to the office of Doorkeeper, or Porter, of the Friary. Some of the older religious shook their wise heads; the Superiors, they feared, had made a mistake, and were ill-advised to confide such an important task to one who had been only a few years in religion. The Doorkeeper at Altotting demanded a well-trained religious man. Altotting was the Mecca of pilgrims from every part of Germany and from distant lands. The little Chapel of Our Lady is one of the most famous shrines in Europe and has been styled the "Lourdes of Bavaria." To the Capuchins of Saint Anne's was entrusted the spiritual care of the pilgrims and people of every age, condition in life, and of various nationalities would be callers at the Friary door. An inexperienced and tactless porter could do a world of harm. Piety without commonsense might turn sinners and timid people from religion instead of drawing them under its influence. But Brother Conrad was a man of strong character and of mature mind and he proved equal to the charge and justified the judgment of his Superiors. For over forty long years he was to occupy the post, and would relinquish it only to answer the call of God to his eternal home.

The office of the Doorkeeper was not always a pleasant post. He had abandoned the world to escape the society of men and to live a life of retirement. Now, he is brought into contact with the world from early morning until late at night! Brother Conrad knew it was God's will, that God wanted him to do it, and that nothing else counted. Others serve God by preaching, teaching, in social service and works of charity, or in splendid deeds that glorify God. The hidden, humble lodge or cell of the Porter was to be Brother Conrad's cloister, his pulpit, and his mission field.

His day began when he rose for the midnight Office. After 1 a.m., he might rest until 3 a.m. Before his seventieth year he more often satisfied himself with two or three hours before midnight and after the Office he remained on vigil in the crypt of the church, praying for the deceased brethren. At 3:30 a.m., it was time to open the Church of Saint Anne and prepare the vestry for the Masses. He left the monastery at 4:45 a.m. and went up the little hill and across the Piazza to Our Lady's Chapel. There, for over forty years, he served Mass daily at 5 a.m.

After the evening meal at 7 p.m., he retired to pray. At 8 o'clock in winter and 9 o'clock in summer, he locked the monastery and church doors and then continued his prayers.

Always at the service of his superiors and the summons of the bell, his duties demanded untiring patience and unlimited charity. His Assistant Porter, Brother Gilbert, stated, on oath, that he never saw Brother Conrad disturbed or angry when answering the calls. No one else could remember hearing an unkind or cross word from his lips. His patience was often sorely tried. On one occasion a bad-tempered tramp asked for food and Brother Conrad brought him a bowl of hot soup. But the soup did not meet with the approval of the epicurean beggar, who flung the bowl away, breaking it into pieces

and spilling the scalding soup on poor Brother Conrad's bare feet. Not ruffled, the Brother quietly remarked, "I fear you don't like this soup. I must try if I can get something else for you." And straightway he fetched another dish for the tramp.

The shrine of Our Lady at Altotting attracts immense concourses of pilgrims and the average number of Confessions and Holy Communions would not be short of 300,000 annually. We can easily understand that the poor Doorkeeper had little leisure from his office; his labors were exacting and continuous. To poor and rich, to great and little, to the aged and the young, the Friary Porter was the same—even-tempered and amiable—willing to render any service in his power. He gave the material food to the hungry and he spoke the word of truth and comfort, as well, to many a disturbed and distressed soul. To his wise counsel many owed a new outlook and a closer acquaintance with the values of life and the designs of a loving Providence.

If Brother Conrad was a saint, we must not imagine that he succeeded in pleasing everyone. Indeed, far from it, often he seemed to satisfy nobody. His Superior rebuked him—it may be that he did it to keep him humble and to afford him opportunities of developing the heroic mould in which his life was forming. The callers at the door were unreasonable. He had to meet all kinds of people—stupid people, as well as intelligent persons, "cracked" people and pious fools; persons who considered themselves superior; clean people and dirty people; persons hard of hearing, or difficult to understand, and talkative people; bishops and clergy, professional men and tradesmen. Yes, the Doorkeeper of the monastery had a busy time—as many as 200 to 300 calls to the door some days! Such was Brother Conrad's life for 41 years. It was a monotonous life, you would say; a continuous drag, a tiresome, uninteresting existence, surely! But, it was filled with acts of love of God and kindness for his fellowmen. He lived a life lit up with an intense faith that was all but vision; a life of unwavering trust in God; a life of ardent and consuming charity. He was a saint, and every day and every hour of the day, he was adding new adornments to his crown and raising himself to a degree nearer to heaven. His conduct was characterized by the persevering perfection with which he accomplished the duties of his office, and the thoroughness with which he performed even the most trivial tasks. But the fire of love that, hidden within his heart like incense upon living coals, sent up the fragrance of his prayers and actions to heaven was not so apparent to men; it was seen by God.

"The fingers ply: the eyes may see
Only the glancing needle which they hold;
And all my life is blossoming inwardly,

And every breath is like a litany,
While through each labor like a thread of gold
Is woven the sweet consciousness of Thee."
- (S. Coolidge.)

He was God's Doorkeeper. God's presence surrounded him at every step; everything and everyone spoke to him of God. His sweet and meek and humble demeanor, too, spoke of God to everyone. And in this he certainly had caught the spirit of his Seraphic Father, who sang, with all creatures, a canticle of praise of the Creator, because deep down in his heart he heard the voice of creation proclaiming the goodness of the Creator and the tender solicitude of Our Father in heaven for all His children here

below.

“Franciscanism is synonymous with the happiness which comes of peace and grace, with the practice of Christian virtues, even amidst the difficulties derived from suffering, that inevitable heritage of the race of man. . . . It is the equivalent of the purification of the soul, and, day-by-day, of closer approach to God in every department of human activity; in prayer, study, charity, and apostolic zeal.” [Archbishop Giovanni Cicognani, in foreword to trans. “Message of Saint Francis” (Gemelli-Hughes.)]

THE CROSS WAS HIS BOOK

Brother Conrad was a saint, it is true. But he was human, and to live as a saint he had to struggle against the same external opposition and interior weaknesses and evil tendencies with which other human beings are confronted. He would have grown weary of his trying life; his patience would have given way before the many severe tests to which his office subjected him, if he had not understood the power of grace and the comfort of prayer. He seemed to accept blame as lightly as praise; he never complained or murmured when he was rebuked; he did not assert his rights when he might have considered that he was treated unfairly; he appeared to be imperturbable—was it because he had no feeling? On the contrary, he was of a highly sensitive nature and at times he felt cut to the very heart. But he knew that he could not do God’s will and suffer no hardship. To do God’s will was his one desire. To suffer for his Crucified Master, was not that his calling? “The Cross is my book,” he wrote. “One glance at it teaches me how I should conduct myself in every circumstance. From it I learn patience and humility. It not only teaches me to bear my crosses with resignation, but renders them sweet and light to me.” It was his book, and he knew how to read it. He would kneel before the Crucifix in his cell and study every wound of his loving Redeemer, think over the words that Jesus spoke from the pulpit on Calvary, and, weeping over the sufferings of his Master, he would utter cries of love for his Crucified Lover. Every day he made the Way of the Cross and his thoughts on the stages of the Via Dolorosa were the lessons that he applied to his own daily pilgrimage of life.

“The Cross is my book!” The devotion of the holy Brother to the mystery of the sufferings and death of Our Savior is manifest in every line of his life. It was the open secret of the even level of cheerful and smiling servitude to duty through the long monotonous days of over forty years at his post at Altotting. For many years his health was very indifferent; even in the novitiate it gave cause for anxiety. In answer to enquiries from home, he confessed that he was “not at all well.” “During Advent I had twice to take to my bed for several days. But, I soon recovered. Then I had to be bled. . . . Pray that God may give me good health, if such is His Will.”

In referring to his later years, the house physician stated, “How the little, stooped Brother, constantly growing weaker, could discharge his duties with untiring kindness; with astonishing patience; and with incredible perseverance! I have known him to be summoned to the door as many as 200 times in the day, yet he would invariably greet the caller with a pleasant smile. . . . Considering his great weakness, the heavy demands of his office, and his bodily affliction (for many years he suffered from asthma), I am forced to the conclusion that he was a silent hero in the cloister and a shining light among his brethren.”

Writing to one whom he considered favored by God and to whom he spoke in confidence with a view to mutual encouragement in the love of God and labor for God's glory, Brother Conrad says, "I cannot write at length, because at night I am in no condition to write, being mostly indisposed, and during the day I have no time. My life consists chiefly in loving and suffering, in admiring and adoring the unspeakable love of God to us poor creatures. I am always most intimately united with my loving God. Even amidst my many duties, I am intimately united with Him. I speak to Him confidentially, as a child with its father. . . . The means which I employ to exercise myself in humility and meekness is no other than the Cross. . . . Sickness can teach us much, if we are only disposed to learn." In a postscript to one of his letters, he writes, "My health is as usual. Though I suffer constantly, I am, nevertheless, able to perform my duties."

Indeed, as a literal description of the life of Brother Conrad, we might adopt the reference of Father Agostino Gemelli, O.F.M., to the heritage of devotion to the Passion of Christ, which passed from the Stigmatisé of La Verna to every true Franciscan. "To awake and let one's eyes rest on the Crucifix, to let the memory sink into one's soul, to convince oneself that a day well spent must be one in which one has nailed his own will to that of God, which is inflexible like a cross; to cast one's eyes once more on the Crucifix in the evening, and consider whether we have learned its lesson; to fall asleep with the Crucifix resting on one's heart, in the hope that the sleep of death will begin in the presence of that One and only Friend Who is not afraid to descend with us into the tomb. And, like Saint Francis after his experience at La Verna, so, too, the Franciscan after a trial continues once more to pray, love, work, and sing—the more his heart bleeds the louder does he sing." (Il Franciscanesimo-Translat. Hughes.)

HIS DEVOTION TO THE EUCHARIST

The God of the Eucharist was the Same Who suffered and died for him; and in the Eucharist and the Holy Mass he had the living memorial of the passion and death of Jesus. No wonder that he could not conceal his burning love for the Tabernacle and the Holy Sacrifice. It was apparent to all who knew him. Under the stairs in the Friary was a small chamber—it could not be called a room. There was just sufficient space for one person to kneel. The Friars called it the "Saint Alexius Cell" because there was a representation of Saint Alexius—the Roman saint, who dwelt for 17 years, unrecognized, in a room under the stairs in his parents' house. To satisfy the devotion of Brother Conrad, his Superior had a small window made, which enabled the devout Doorkeeper to have a view of the Tabernacle. This was Saint Conrad's favorite retreat when he had a moment to spare. On his knees, and, with eyes fixed on the Tabernacle, he would pour out his love for His loving Lord Who dwelt in that little prison of love—and he repeated over and over again ejaculations of faith, adoration,, and love. To this quiet corner he would retire every morning, for preparation for Communion and for thanksgiving. There he would make a short visit to salute his Master on his way to take up duty in the morning and at night before going off duty for his few hours rest. Here is a prayer he made for his own use: "I have come to spend a few moments with Thee, O Jesus, and in spirit I prostrate myself in the dust before Thy holy Tabernacle to adore Thee, my Lord and my God, in deepest humility. One more day has come to its close, dear Jesus; another day which brings me nearer to the grave, and my beloved heavenly home. Once more, O Jesus, my heart longs for Thee, the true Bread of Life, which contains all sweetness and relish." The people often remarked the intense devotion of the Brother when serving Mass in the Chapel of Our

Lady, or when receiving Holy Communion. His attachment to the Holy Mass was the explanation of his reverence for priests. Whenever he opened the Friary door for a priest, he was immediately on his knees to kiss the anointed hands and ask a blessing.

THE APOSTLE OF MARY

Even in his child years he manifested an exceptional devotion to God's Holy Mother. We have already seen that as a child Apostle of Mary, he persuaded many of his little companions to adopt his own practice of saying the beads on the way to school. When he had reached the years of early manhood, he took long journeys to visit the shrines of the Blessed Virgin at Kronberg, Marianhilf, Altotting and other places of pilgrimage. And during the forty years of his occupation as Doorkeeper at Altotting, he never seemed happier than when he could kneel before the altar in the holy chapel or before the image of the Mother of God in the Friary Church of Saint Anne. As he knelt at the altar, rapt in prayer, "glowing balls of fire seemed to proceed from his lips and rise to the miraculous image of Our Lady. This happened several times." Such is the testimony of a Redemptorist religious, who was an eyewitness. Others stated that they noticed the same phenomenon. Arid amongst his clientele of the poor and the children at the monastery door he carried out a veritable apostleship of devotion to the Mother of God. For the Immaculate Virgin, he had a truly child-like affection. Was he not her Doorkeeper? He opened the Friary door for many a pilgrim to her shrine, but to how many hearts did his warm words of love unlock the treasures of devotion to Mary?

As long as his health permitted, in his free hour off duty every day he would walk to the Chapel of Our Lady and kneel, absorbed in prayer, before her image. One favorite devotion of Brother Conrad was the little beads, or Crown of the Immaculate Conception—a distinctly Capuchin devotion. You would notice the tiny beads nearly always round his finger. Today that finger remains intact, still preserved as a relic, although the body of the saint has crumbled to dust. He also loved the Little Office of the Blessed Virgin, and her Rosary and the Litany. His zeal in seizing every opportunity of winning others—especially the children—to practices of piety towards his Immaculate Patroness, earned for him the title of "Apostle of Mary."

DUTY WAS HIS FIRST PIETY

A man of prayer, who clearly loved to be close to the Tabernacle, where he could hold conversation with his living God, and whose tenderest affections were stirred when he knelt before the altar of Mary and gazed upon the image of the Immaculate Mother of Jesus, yet Brother Conrad did not allow his devotions to interfere with his duty. For him, duty was the first piety, because he understood what too often is sadly misunderstood: that religion is not divorced from labor, but, rather, ennobles and beautifies it and enriches it. Brother Giles—one of Saint Francis' earliest companions—used to say that if a Religious were engaged in conversation with the angels and his Superior called, it would be his duty to break off the conversation and obey the call of his Superior. And so it was with Brother Conrad. Even if he were absorbed in prayer in the chapel and the door-bell rang, at once he would rise from his knees and answer the bell. The summons of the bell for him was the call of God.

FATHER OF THE POOR

The poor had a kind friend in Brother Conrad. Never did a hungry mouth beg for bread in vain. He did not know how to refuse, and his was no grudging giving; rather did it seem as if the beggar conferred a boon on him, so beaming was the smile which accompanied his gift. His brother visited him at Altotting sometimes to ask his advice about family affairs. “He received me most cordially,” the brother tells us, “but he never allowed my presence to interfere with his duties as porter, especially not in the case of the poor, to whom, he told me at Altotting, he would gladly have given everything.

“Never worry about what you give to the poor,” Brother Conrad used to say, “It will all come back again.” Brother Cook was not always satisfied to take this counsel literally. Knowing that Brother Conrad took all he could lay his hands on for his poor and even sought to secure for them the pick and the best of all, Brother Cook would hide the victuals. If Brother Conrad thought that there was not likely to be much left after the meal, he would carefully guard his own portion and, after the meal, bear it off to some poor caller at the door. They called him the “Father of the Poor.” Since his death, as many as 3000 petitions have been laid at his tomb in a week. He has shown himself as bounteous in his favors and as rich in his spiritual gifts as he was in his material alms in life; and he has proved himself particularly lavish in his gifts of comfort and fortitude to those who seek his help to sanctify their lives in humble conditions, and to bear the cross of daily life.

THE FRIEND OF THE CHILDREN

Children instinctively recognize a true follower of Christ. Christ was their Friend; He bade their elders to suffer the little ones to come to Him. And the children of Altotting all seemed to know Brother Conrad—he was their friend and they had no doubt about it. He loved them affectionately and was interested in everything that concerned them. Indeed, even when 70 years had whitened the head of Brother Conrad, the old man still retained the heart of a child. He never seemed so happy and so much at his ease as when he conversed with his little friends. Many of his little clients, who, in after years, followed a call to the priesthood or the cloister, thanked the influence of the gentle and humble manner of their dear Brother Conrad for the fascination of religion in their young lives. Kneeling at the saint’s tomb, they beg him still to be their guide and guardian angel in the work of God to which he inspired them to devote their lives.

Before bestowing a gift on the little ones—whether it was a portion of food to a poor child or a picture or some object of piety, Brother Conrad would always have a word to say to them about their prayers or their conduct, and he generally invited them to kneel with him before the image of the Blessed Mother and devoutly say a Hail Mary.

The children were always glad to have an excuse to meet the Brother, and you would often see a cluster of them around him and eagerly listening to him. They sometimes played pranks on the good Brother. People said that Brother Conrad was a saint; they would test his patience. They would call at the door and ask for some Father who was not at home; it was Brother Conrad they wanted to meet, and the trick succeeded. He knew their ways and, indeed it was not difficult to see through the little game. But he

would just smilingly say: “You cannot see the Father now for he is not at home.” “But, Brother?” and they would have him in a conversation, and it would be all smiles and laughs (and really, perhaps, they quite forgot the existence of the priest whose name filled the gap for them). At other times, they would ring the bell, and then they would hide around the corner to watch and see how the Brother would look when he found he had been tricked. But he would not let them know that he had the remotest suspicion of the doings of the little criminals! He saw innocence and purity and love in the faces and the hearts of those little friends of Christ and how could he be angry?

THE CALL TO GOD’S DOOR

Forty-one years at his post of duty! One morning (18 April 1894) with the help of a staff, he dragged himself to Our Lady’s Chapel and served the 5 o’clock Mass as usual. About 9 o’clock he went to Brother Deodatus’ cell and asked him to take his place at the door for a while as he was not feeling well. After Vespers he sought the Superior saying, “Father Guardian, I can carry on no longer.”

The Superior responded, “You had better lie down in the “Mother of God” cell” (the cell on the corridor near the door was known by this title amongst the Friars, from an image of the Mother of God that hung in it). You have always been devoted to her, Brother,” said the Superior.

Brother Conrad was overjoyed; no favor would he have longed for more than to be allowed to rest in the cell of the Holy Mother. “He handed over to others the keys of the monastery at Altotting,” said the Procurator-General in his address to the Holy Father, “to receive from God, only three days later, the keys of paradise.” Three days later he received the Last Sacraments. In the evening, when the religious were at prayer, the Friary bell rang twice.

“No one has gone to the door,” thought the dying man, and he rose to answer the bell. A young Brother happened to be passing the door of the cell and was just in time to come to his assistance as the old man collapsed. Gently, the Brother laid Brother Conrad on the bed and then summoned the community. The prayers for the dying were said and, as the Angelus bell ceased ringing, the soul of the saint was summoned to the eternal mansions. The golden door had opened to receive the “Humble Doorkeeper of the Capuchin Friary!” “Well done, good and faithful servant—because thou wast faithful in little things. . . . Enter into the joy of the Lord.” (Matt. xxv, 21.)

HIS GLORIFICATION

Before the image of the Holy Mother, in the chapel where he had so often prayed, they laid the body of the dead saint. It was 21 April 1894. The news spread quickly and the people—particularly the little children—hastened to come to venerate the remains of their cherished friend. Yes, the people had no doubt that he was a saint. They prayed to him and many were the favors they ascribed to the efficacy of his intercession with God. Miracles, it was said, were being wrought in response to prayer to him, and soon widespread devotion to the servant of God and confidence in his power, attracted pilgrims to his tomb from all over Bavaria and from distant places. The post bag was laden with letters, and from the post-stamps it was evident that the name of Brother Conrad had travelled across the ocean. As many as

3000 petitions were often received within a week to be laid on the tomb of the holy man.

The Bishop of Passau was anxious that a larger church should be built in Altotting for the accommodation of the pilgrims, and their number had considerably increased in consequence of the added attraction of the fame of the saintly Capuchin Brother. Father Joseph Anthony was entrusted with the task of carrying out the wishes of the Bishop, but he was at once confronted with the difficulty of providing the funds. One day in his perplexity he knelt at Brother Conrad's tomb and prayed saying, "If you are a saint, help me. I need urgently, at this moment, 1000 marks—I need them today." That same afternoon there was a ring at the Friary door and the Superior was called to an unexpected visitor! What was his mission? Simply to tell the Father that he had placed 1000 marks in the bank to be disposed of as he required. The astonished Superior then turned again with confidence to Brother Conrad and promised that if he would help him build the new church, he would labor for the promotion of the cause of his canonization. The church—one of the largest in Germany—began in 1908, was dedicated in 1912. It has since been raised to the dignity of a Basilica. Father Joseph Anthony did not fail to keep his promise.

The decree testifying to the practice of the virtues in a heroic degree was read and confirmed by his Holiness Pope Pius XI on the Feast of the Assumption, 15 August 1928. An excerpt from the decree will point the lesson of the life and the mission of the servant of God, "To counteract the incessant pursuit of the esteem, honor, and attractions of the world by people of every condition, nothing can be more helpful than the example of persons who, though of distinguished family, despise worldly joys and the delights of family life, choose a hard and austere form of life, and, by a life of poverty and humility, show what we must do, what avoid, if the love of God is to dwell in our hearts and make us truly pleasing and acceptable to God . . . Among such men of recent times Brother Conrad of Parzham stands forth as a shining example, as a strong rebuke to the licentiousness of our soft, self-conceited age."

In the months of February, April and June, 1930, sessions were held for the examination of the miracles submitted. Two miracles were accepted as authentic. One was the cure of a little child of four years, who, owing to a fall, suffered such distortions of the bones that she could not stand. The father of the child promised Brother Conrad that if his little girl were cured he would pay a visit to Altotting and pray at his tomb. Scarcely was the promise spoken when the child rose from the floor and walked over to the amazed father. The other was the cure of a widow who had suffered from a most painful wound in her foot, and whose case had been pronounced incurable by physicians. Through the intercession of Brother Conrad, the wound was healed and she suffered no further pain. Brother Conrad was beatified by Pope Pius XI on 15 June 1930. On Pentecost Sunday, 20 June 1934, the Supreme Pontiff, Pope Pius XI, solemnly proclaimed Brother Conrad a saint.

"In the garden of the church," said the Holy Father in his canonization sermon, "the white flowers of modesty, the purple flowers of martyrdom, and the fruit-bearing trees of eminent men are not wanting. But by their side grow, also, tender and diffident, the violets with their sweet fragrance. To these Brother Conrad, whom we have crowned today with the crown of holiness, certainly belonged. He, if anyone, had responded to the inspirations of the Holy Ghost and he could say of himself with perfect truth, 'I am always doing what will please Him.'"

The sermon concluded with a prayer for faithfulness in little things; because purity, modesty, and Christian charity are the ways and means to achieve Christian perfection.

“A saint has been given to us,” said the Vicar of Christ, concluding his address, “and a new intercessor.”

On one who never coveted honors or titles, the Church of God has conferred the highest honor in her giving. A humble laybrother of the Order of the Poor Man of Assisi is honored today as no earthly prince or intellectual giant is honored. The praise of Conrad of Parzham is on the lips of millions of men of every nation on earth. It is the answer of the venerable Church of Christ to the world today, as it was her answer and the answer of Christ nineteen centuries ago, “Jesus Christ yesterday, and today, and the same forever.” (Heb. xiii, 8.) It is the triumph of the Eternal Wisdom and the Victory of the Cross.

Saint Conrad did no brilliant deeds. So simple and unobtrusive was his life that few of those who lived with him realized that they lived so close to a saint. They say he foretold things that happened years afterwards but, then, it was only years after, when the words of the humble Brother came true—it was only then that people wondered. The beauty of his life was not visible exteriorly, because it was principally in the interior spirit, in the pure intention, and in the generous disposition that accompanied his labors that their holiness consisted. His actions were very ordinary; his position afforded him little opportunity to do anything out of the ordinary. But it is in this, as it has been remarked, that Saint Conrad reminds the world of a truth which it does not sufficiently grasp—the dignity of human nature; the truth that human nature is great in itself and by itself. Created by the Eternal Maker of all things, purchased by the infinite love of the Divine Redeemer, human nature does not find its greatness in the things which it employs, but in the wisdom with which it employs them and in the purpose to which it directs them and the love with which it enriches them. The saints had the wisdom of God and guided their lives by its dictates. The wisdom of the world is foolishness before God and that Divine Wisdom which was Christ’s, He gives to His little ones. “I confess to Thee, O God, Father Almighty, because Thou hast hidden these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them to little ones.” And, so, tender youth and fragile maidens, beggars and unlettered men, as well as men of learning and wealth, are chosen for the honors of God’s Kingdom, whilst the great ones of this world are forgotten. We cannot conclude this short sketch of Saint Conrad more fittingly than in the words of his Holiness Pope Pius XI.—the representative on earth of Christ the God-Man and the Redeemer of the world: “Brother Conrad really left things worthwhile—a fairly rich paternal estate, extensive possessions, an enviable, and, perhaps, actually much-envied position, in his native place. He left all to retire into the seclusion of the cloister, into the humble family of the Capuchins, entering therein as a simple lay-brother, to become the monastery porter. . . . The venerable Brother was ever punctual, uniformly self-possessed and faithful to his duty—a shining example of prudence and patience, of eminent love of neighbor and willingness to serve others. All this, when faithfully observed throughout life, is in itself sufficient to make a saint and a hero.” God’s Doorkeeper, by his example of life, points to us the way of faithful service of God in our sphere of life; the way that, at the end of our pilgrimage, will open for us the golden gates of the home of Our Father Who is in heaven.

Nihil obstat:

J. DONOVAN, Censor Deputatus.

Imprimatur:

✠ D. MANNIX,

Archiepiscopus Melbournensis,